Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 83-92

Pitt and the King, 1784-1801

Reasons for the Victory over Fox

While this contest was being carried on in Parliament, the contending parties were not idle out of doors. The king, who rushed into it with so much boldness, had not been prepared for the alarming demonstrations of Parliament. If the minister of his choice had now been driven from power, he would have been prostrate before the coalition. This danger was at first imminent; and the king awaited it with dismay. Defeat in such a contest would have been humiliating and disgraceful. Believing that he could be 'no longer of utility to this country, nor could with honour continue in this [84] island,' he repeated his threats of retiring to Hanover, rather than submit to what he deemed the destruction of his kingly power. From such extremities, however, he was relieved by the declining numbers of his opponents, and the increasing influence and popularity of his own cause. The coalition, though powerful in Parliament, by means of a combination of parties, had never been popular in the country. While in power they had been exposed to continual obloquy, which was redoubled after their dismissal. The new ministers and the court party, taking advantage of this feeling, represented Mr. Fox's India Bill as an audacious attempt to interfere with the prerogatives of the crown, and its authors as enemies of the king and constitution. The loyalty of the people was aroused, and they soon ranged themselves on the side of the king and his ministers. Addresses and other demonstrations of popular sympathy were received from all parts of the country; and the king was thus encouraged to maintain a firm attitude in front of his opponents.(1) The tactics of the two parties in Parliament, and the conduct of their leaders, were also calculated to convert public opinion to the king's side. Too much exasperated to act with caution, the opposition ruined their cause by factious extravagance and [85] precipitancy. They were resolved to take the king's cabinet by storm, and without pause or parley struck incessantly at the door. Their very dread of a dissolution, which they so loudly condemned, showed little confidence in popular support. Instead of making common cause with the people, they lowered their contention to a party struggle. Constitutionally the king had a right to dismiss his ministers, and to appeal to the people to support his new administration. The opposition endeavoured to restrain him in the exercise of this right, and to coerce him by a majority of the existing House of Commons. They had overstepped the constitutional limits of their power; and the assaults directed against prerogative, recoiled upon themselves.

On the other side, Mr. Pitt, as minister, relied upon the prerogative of the king to appoint him, —the duty of Parliament to consider his measures,—and his own right to advise the king to dissolve Parliament, if those measures were obstructed. The tact, judgment, courage, and commanding talents of Mr. Pitt inspired his party with confidence, and secured popularity for his cause; while, by maintaining a defensive attitude, he offered no diversion to the factious tactics of his opponents. His accession to office had been immediately marked by the defection of several members from the opposition,—a circumstance always calculated upon by a minister in those times,—and was soon followed by the forbearance of others, who were not prepared to participate in the violent measures of their leaders. The influence of the court and [86] government was strenuously exerted in making converts; and the growing popularity of their cause discouraged the less zealous of their opponents.

The General Election of 1784

Mr. Pitt had waited patiently while the majorities against him in Parliament were falling away, and public opinion was declaring itself, more and more, in his favour. The results of the dissolution now revealed the judgment with which he had conducted his cause, and chosen his time for appealing to the people.(2) Every preparation had been made for using the influence of the crown at the elections: the king himself took the deepest personal interest in the success of the ministerial candidates; and Mr. Pitt's popularity was at its height, when Parliament was dissolved. His enemies were everywhere put to the rout, at the hustings. To support Mr. Pitt was the sole pledge of the popular candidates. Upwards of one hundred and sixty of his late opponents lost their seats; and on the assembling of the new Parliament, he could scarcely reckon his majorities.(3) The minister was popular in the country, all-powerful in Parliament, and had [87] the entire confidence of the court. If such was the success of the minister, what was the triumph of the king! He had expelled one ministry, and retained another, in defiance of the House of Commons. The people had pressed forth loyally to his support: and by their aid, he had overborne all opposition to his will. He now possessed a strong government and a minister in whom he confided; and he enjoyed once more power, freedom, and popularity. Not only had he overcome and ruined a party which he hated: but he had established the ascendency of the crown, which henceforth, for nearly fifty years continued to prevail over every other power in the state.

Relations between Pitt and the King

Such results, however, were not without danger. Already the king was too prone to exercise his power ; and the encouragement he had received, was likely to exalt his views of prerogative. But he had now a minister who—with higher abilities and larger views of state policy—had a will even stronger than his own. Throughout his reign, it had been the tendency of the king's personal administration to favour men whose chief merit was their subservience to his own views, instead of leaving the country to be governed,—as a free state should be governed,—by its ablest and most popular statesmen. He had only had one other minister of the same lofty pretensions,—Lord Chatham; and now, while trusting that statesman's son,—sharing his councils, and approving his [88] policy,—he yielded to his superior intellect. Yet were the royal predilections not without influence on the minister. Reared in the Whig school, Mr. Pitt soon deserted the principles, as he had been severed from the connections, of that party. He had been raised to power by royal favour,—maintained in it by prerogative,—and was now in the ascendant, by having made common cause with the crown. Hence he naturally leant towards prerogative, and Tory principles of government. His contests with his great antagonist, Mr. Fox, and the Whig party, still further alienated him from the principles of his youth. Until the French Revolution, however, his policy was wise and liberal: but from that time his rule became arbitrary, and opposed to public liberty. And such were his talents, and such the temper of the times, that he was able to make even arbitrary principles popular. During his long administration the people were converted to Tory principles, and encouraged the king and the minister to repress liberty of thought, and to wage war against opinion. If the king was no longer his own minister,—as in the time of Lord North,—he had the satisfaction of seeing his own principles carried out by hands far abler than his own. In prosecutions of the press, and the repression of democratic movements at home, 'the minister was, perhaps, as zealous as the king: in carrying on war to crush democracy abroad, the king was more zealous than his minister.' They [89] laboured strenuously together in support of monarchy all over the world; and respected too little the constitutional liberties of their own people.

Increased Influence of the Crown

Nor did the king relax his accustomed activity in public affairs. From the close of the American war until the breaking out of hostilities with France, his pleasure was taken by the

Secretary-at-War upon every commission granted in the army; and throughout Mr. Pitt's administration, every act of the executive was submitted to him, for his judgment and approval.(4) We find him combating the opinions of his cabinet concerning foreign affairs, in elaborate papers: criticising the policy of government measures,—commenting upon debates and divisions in Parliament: praising ministers, and censuring the opposition: approving taxes: discussing amendments to bills: settling the appointment and dismissal of officers, the grant of peerages, and the preferment of bishops. With his own hand he struck the name of Mr. Fox from the list of privy-councillors.

And if, during the administration of Mr. Pitt, the king' s independent exercise of influence was somewhat less active, the power of the crown itself,—as wielded jointly by himself [90] and his minister,—was greater than at any former period. The king and his minister were now absolute. A war is generally favourable to authority, by bringing together the people and the government, in a common cause and combined exertions. The French war, notwithstanding its heavy burthens and numerous failures, was popular on account of the principles it was supposed to represent; and the vast expenditure, if it distressed the people, multiplied the patronage of the crown,—afforded a rich harvest for contractors,—and made the fortunes of farmers and manufacturers, by raising the price of every description of produce. The 'moneyed classes' rallied round the war minister,—bought seats in Parliament with their sudden gains,—ranged themselves in a strong phalanx behind their leader,—cheered his speeches, and voted for him in every division. Their zeal was rewarded with peerages, baronetcies, patronage, and all the good things which an inordinate expenditure enabled him to dispense. For years, opposition in Parliament to a minister thus supported, was an idle form; and if beyond its walls, the voice of complaint was raised, the arm of the law was strong and swift to silence it. To oppose the minister, had become high treason to the state.

Parliamentary Reform

However great the king's confidence in a minister so powerful as Mr. Pitt, whenever their views of policy differed, his Majesty's resolution was as inflexible as ever. Nor were his ministers secure from the exercise of [91] his personal influence against them, when he was pleased to use it. The first measure on which Mr. Pitt was likely to encounter objections from the king, was that for parliamentary reform. Having pledged himself to the principles of such a measure, while in opposition, he was determined not to be unfaithful to them in office. But before he ventured to bring forward his plan, he prudently submitted it to the king, and deprecated the opposition of the court. Writing, on the 20th March, 1785, the king said, Mr. Pitt's 'letter expressed that there is but one issue of the business he could look upon as fatal, that is, the possibility of the measure being rejected by the weight of those who are supposed to be connected with the government. Mr. Pitt must recollect that, though I have ever thought it unfortunate that he had early engaged himself in this measure, he ought to lay his thoughts before the House; that out of personal regard to him I would avoid giving any opinion to any one on the opening of the door to parliamentary reform, except to him; therefore I am certain Mr. Pitt cannot suspect my having influenced any one on the occasion. If others choose, for base ends, to impute such a conduct to me, I must bear it as former false suggestions.' He proceeded to say that every man ought to vote according to his own opinion; and warned Mr. Pitt that 'there are questions men will not, by friendship, be biassed to adopt.' This incident is significant. Mr. Pitt apprehended the exertion of the [92] influence of the crown to defeat his measure. The king was aware of the suspicions attaching to himself: but while promising not to interfere, he could not refrain from intimating that the measure would be defeated,—as indeed it was,—without his interference. On both sides the personal influence of the king over the deliberations of Parliament, was fully acknowledged.

The extent to which the preponderating influence of the crown was recognised during this period, is exemplified by the political relations of parties to his Majesty and to the Prince of

Wales, on the occasion of the king's illness in 1788.(5) At that time, ministers enjoyed the entire confidence of the king, and commanded an irresistible majority in Parliament; yet was it well understood by both parties, that the first act of the Regent would be to dismiss his father's ministers, and take into his councils the leaders of the opposition. Thus even the party which protested against the influence of the crown was quite prepared to use it, and by its aid to brave a hostile majority in Parliament, as Mr. Pitt had successfully done a few years before.

Footnotes.

1. Writing to Mr. Pitt, 22nd Feb., in reference to his answer to the address of the 20th, the king said: 'I trust that while the answer is drawn up with civility, it will be a clear support of my own rights, which the addresses from all parts of the kingdom show me the people feel essential to their liberties.'—Tomline's Life of Pitt. i. 457.
2. 'The precedent of 1784 establishes this rule of conduct: that if the ministers chosen by the Crown do not possess the confidence of the House of Commons, they may advise an appeal to the people, with whom rests the ultimate decision. This course has been followed in 1807, in 1831, in 1834, and in l841. In 1807 and 1831, the Crown was enabled, as in 1784, to obtain the confidence of the new House of Commons. In 1834 and 1841, the decision was adverse to the existing ministry.'—Fox Mem., ii. 246.
3. His India Bill was carried by a majority of 271 to 60. He was defeated, however on the Westminster Parliamentary Reform, and the Scheme of Fortifications on the Coast.
4. Mr. Wynn, 14th April, 1812; Hans. Deb., xxii. 334. On recovering from his illness, Feb. 23, 1789, the king writes, 'I must decline entering into a pressure of business, and, indeed, for the rest of my life, shall expect others to fulfil the duties of their employments, and only keep that superintending eye which can be effected without labour and fatigue.'—Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, ii., App. vii.
5. See Chap. III.

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